

Bicester North West Eco community - background

Cherwell District Council has opposed the eco-town at Weston Otmoor. It considers that a large free-standing town like that at Weston Otmoor would harm Bicester. The Council has made clear to Government its commitment to making sure that Bicester remains a balanced community, providing new jobs and facilities for the people that live there.

As part of the Government's assessment of its eco town programme in general, and all of the short listed schemes, it is carrying out a "sustainability appraisal". This appraisal is looking at the environmental, economic and social effects of each of the eco-town proposals, including Weston Otmoor. In the light of the views on the eco-town previously made by Cherwell District Council, the Government asked the Council whether we could identify any alternative option which should be assessed against the Weston Otmoor proposal in the Sustainability Appraisal. The Council considers that, notwithstanding our opposition to the eco-town in principle, we should see whether, in theory there is an alternative eco-development that is less harmful to local communities than the proposal at Weston Otmoor.

The Council has been working to prepare our own plans for how future housing growth is to be accommodated across the district - based on the figures given to us in the emerging South East Plan (which do not include any eco-town proposal). As part of this we are currently consulting on a series of "options for growth" and have identified a number of possible alternative major housing sites around Bicester. This work has given us a basis for suggesting an alternative theoretical location in accordance with the Government's request.

In putting this alternative forward, the Council would wish to make the following points clear:-

- We are not formally supporting this as an alternative eco-town location. It is being put forward as a means of testing the "sustainability" of the Weston Otmoor proposal in the event that the Government wishes to see an eco-town in Cherwell District. The Council continues to support the view that growth within the district should be decided through a plan-led system, such as the process that has been undertaken on the South East Plan, and not through speculative landowner/developer schemes such as the proposal at Weston Otmoor.
- The Council's current "options for growth" public consultation has identified a number of possible major housing sites around Bicester. These include land at Howes Lane and at Lords Lane. These sites have formed the basis of the alternative proposal. We are not saying that the two sites are therefore the Council's "preferred sites" at Bicester for further housing growth. They are being put forward now because the Government asked us to identify a possible alternative location which could accommodate at least 5,000 houses. Neither of the other sites around Bicester that we have identified could, in our view, do this. They are, however, reasonable alternatives for accommodating a smaller number of new homes in accordance with the figures in the South East Plan.
- No specific proposal for an eco-development at north west Bicester has been put together. The alternative put forward by the Council is based on an emerging understanding of where, theoretically, further housing growth could take place. It has not been looked at in any detail at this stage and its assumptions and opportunities have not been tested or discussed with other stakeholders.

Damaging eco town proposal 'not dead yet' warns local council leader

Cherwell councillors have warned against complacency that the Weston Otmoor eco town proposal has been killed off - even though it was given the lowest possible rating in the Government's first round appraisal of the proposals.

"This damaging proposal, which we strongly oppose, is not dead yet," warned Cllr Barry Wood, Leader of Cherwell District Council at a meeting of the council's Executive.

Setting out the council's battle plan for the next phase of Government consultation, Cllr Wood described the eco town as "the biggest threat to the future survival and prosperity of Bicester and the south of the district."



"We are up against it," he told the meeting.

The Weston Otmoor plan being promoted by a private developer is to build 15 thousand new homes on green land between the A34 and M40. It came bottom of the 12 short-listed eco town proposals from around the country, with a 'C' rating to indicate that it would 'only be suitable with substantial and exceptional innovation.'

Cherwell's floated alternative for an eco suburb North West of Bicester was given a higher B rating by the Government assessors.

But local councillors stressed they were not promoting the rival proposal as yet.

"When the then Housing Minister Caroline Flint visited the area earlier this year, she asked us quite directly: if local people don't like Weston Otmoor eco town, then what's the alternative? So we have now put an alternative into the equation and it has been shown by the Government's own assessment that it is in fact a better option," says Cllr Wood.

Defending the council's tactics, he said offering growth opportunities on the edge of Bicester was the very reason that Weston Otmoor was now graded bottom of the national eco town list.

"At the end of the day, decisions on the development of Bicester should rest with this authority," he said. "We should decide what's best for the area - and this exercise is about bringing the process properly into the Local Development Framework."

Councillors were briefed on the latest situation in the planning battle at an Executive meeting on Monday evening. They were warned that the developers promoting the Weston Otmoor scheme were expected to try and address Government criticism and to revise their proposals.

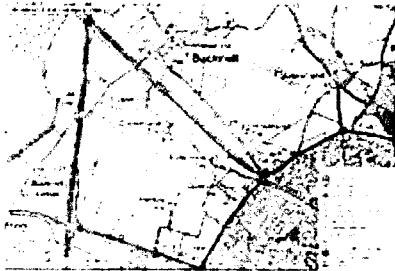
However, there has also been an important change in the Government's position, according the Cherwell District Council's head of planning Philip Clarke.

"The Minister's letter gives an indication that 'eco development' numbers will count towards South East Plan requirements. The council should seek to consolidate that position as far as possible," he says in his report. "Additionally, the Minister offers Government support, and funding, for eco development at Bicester."

That suggestion of funding, Cherwell hopes, could provide a route for investing in community facilities and other infrastructure which, they say, the already growing town of Bicester desperately needs.

Weston Otmoor - alternative eco-town proposal for Sustainability Appraisal testing

As an alternative to the Weston Otmoor eco-town proposal, consideration has been given to an eco-town on the edge of Bicester, directly abutting the town.



Cherwell District Council, as part of its Core Strategy, has identified two adjacent sites (land at Howes Lane and Lords Lane) as "reasonable alternative strategic sites" which it believes could yield at least 2,600 homes. The sites, which could be developed together to form the eco town, are on the north-west side of the town and are bounded by the B4030 to the south and the B4100 to the north west. The farm land here is relatively unconstrained and the nearest settlement is the village of Bucknell 1.9 km away to the north-west.

The area could, theoretically, provide for an eco-town of 5,000 homes or more including related employment and community infrastructure. Some work has already been carried out by Cherwell District Council to explore the constraints on this site, and from this there is no reason to believe that an eco-town of this scale could not be achieved[1]. The attached plan, together with the schedule in appendix 1, indicates the main constraints and some of the opportunities on the site.

Whilst the site has the capacity to establish a self contained eco-town, there are also positive benefits in the location of the site. Bicester lies within the Oxford2Cambridge Arc and development in this location would benefit from this initiative. More locally, the proposal may bring positive benefits to Bicester. The town has grown significantly in population in recent years (45% between 1991 and 2001 compared with 5% across Oxfordshire). Whilst historically Bicester has attracted a number of large B8 uses, it now is experiencing a shortage of space for new smaller start-up businesses and a lack of expansion space as businesses grow. There are also high commuting levels with 65% of people in Bicester travelling more than 5 miles to work. Cherwell District Council is seeking to develop the employment base in Bicester to create opportunities within other employment sectors. There may therefore be a synergy between the employment opportunities being offered at the eco-town and existing identified needs within Bicester.

[1]An area has been plotted on the plan of approximately 330 hectares. This would be capable of accommodating 5,000 houses at a gross density of 15 dwellings/ha.

Appendix 1

Constraints

- Land ownership difficult to assess – no site submissions received for land beyond that assessed for the Reasonable Alternatives identification (see attached plan), so land ownership difficult to identify. Individual farms throughout the area may indicate mixed ownership
- No major landscape constraints – predominantly farmland with large scale, regularly shaped fields bounded by hedgerows. No landscape designations within this area. No major landscape impact identified during consideration of Howes Lane or Lords Lane – not particularly sensitive locations. An Ecologically Important Landscape to south of B4030 (Middleton Stoney Road) at Bignell Park. No consultee comments on landscape, i.e. comments from Natural England or OCC. Landscape Sensitivity Analysis required
- Ecology constraints include Ardley Cutting and Quarry SSSI between Bucknell and M40, described as 'good quality'. Also UK BAP Habitat (low calcareous grassland). Records of Great Crested Newt near to Howes Lane. Also records of 'Cherwell notable species' 2 'locally protected species records' in this area, with more around Bignell Park to the south. Individual woodland parcels and hedgerows throughout the site (Ancient Woodland at Upper Farm), identified as 'species rich' and having potential for breeding birds. Watercourses running through this area are potentially rich in ecological value
- Flood Zones 2 and 3 along the watercourse which crosses the site in the south eastern corner but flooding not a 'show stopper'
- No Conservation Areas in close proximity. Grade II listed building at Himley Farm within the site, listed buildings in Bucknell as well as National Monuments. Oxfordshire County Council objected during Non Stat Plan preparation regarding high archaeological potential within this area and a field evaluation is required
- Impact in terms of coalescence with Bucknell – population in 2001 of 249. Category 2 village with 'few services, limited public transport, relatively remote'.

Opportunities

- Conservation Target Area north of Bucknell at Tusmore and Shelswell Park presents an opportunity for biodiversity enhancement
- Railway runs through site NW – SE – possibility for new rail station. Previously the companies operating this line have not been supportive (Non Stat Plan preparation)

- M40 crosses western corner of site – possibility for new junction? Alternatively access via the A41 and the new perimeter road at SW Bicester
- Thames Valley Police Authority is promoting land along Howes Lane to be allocated for TVPA operational facilities (currently the Police Traffic Base is within this site), potentially as part of an urban extension, so opportunities exist for employment generating development
- Also the existing Avonbury Business Park (high tech employment uses) near to the Bucknell Road junction presents opportunities to enhance employment provision, thus increasing balance of provision across Bicester
- Opportunities exist to improve accessibility in terms of improvements/upgrade to Howes Lane and potentially the Howes Lane/Bucknell Road/Lords Lane junction.

Cherwell's Eco Town concept reflects current housing plans

Cherwell District Council has confirmed the idea of an alternative eco site in North West Bicester could keep any eco development imposed by Government in line with its own long term planning objectives for the area.

The council's Local Development Framework (LDF) has already identified potential sites where houses could be built over the next 20 years. The idea of an alternative site in North West Bicester directly reflects this long term planning.

The possible area suggested by the council has been put to the Government by Cherwell as a better alternative to the proposed eco town at Weston Otmoor, some three miles outside Bicester. However, this is only on the basis that the Council does not accept the Government's view that Cherwell should be a location for additional growth.

If the council's new alternative was accepted, up to 5000 new homes could be built on the outskirts of Bicester. The council's view is that these homes would help fulfil its long term plan for building new houses across Cherwell, under the South East Plan arrangement, where the government requires 13400 new homes to be built in the next 20 years.

Councillor Michael Gibbard, portfolio holder for planning and housing, explains:

"Our long term plans for Bicester include building new houses, which are part of Bicester itself, and can benefit from the proximity to an established and successful town.

"The development of a free standing, unplanned new town, like that suggested for Weston Otmoor, has never been part of the LDF or South East plan and would harm the successful long term development of Bicester. We need to make sure Bicester remains a balanced community, providing new jobs and facilities for the people who live there. We take our planning responsibilities seriously, which is one of the reasons we have suggested an alternative to the Weston site. It makes much more sense to develop homes with eco credentials within the framework of our existing plans for new housing and development."

The government will need to help us explore potential infrastructure benefits which an eco community at North West Bicester could bring.

"In particular we would need to explore fully transport options, school provision and the employment potential connected to this development. Increasing the population of Bicester means residents will need facilities. This could help strengthen the case for a new hospital for the town," said Councillor Gibbard.

"We have to recognise that Weston Otmoor remains a serious eco town contender and this is just another stage in what is likely to be a long-running planning debate. Cherwell will continue to resist the Government's apparent view that the district can take on more homes than we originally planned for. Such decisions must be planning led."

The second stage of consultation on eco towns is now underway, following the Government's initial assessment of suggested sites' green credentials. The North West Bicester site received a 'B' rating. The Weston Otmoor site was classed as a 'C' - meaning it would only be feasible as an eco town if substantial changes were made to the proposal.

Councils vow to continue eco town fight

Cherwell District Council and Oxfordshire County Council have responded to publication of the Government's draft Planning Policy Statement on Eco Towns and the associated Sustainability Appraisal of proposed locations by reaffirming their opposition to the proposed Weston Otmoor site.

The councils' initial reaction to the document, which both still need to consider in detail, is one of disappointment that Weston Otmoor is still a potential location. The councils will continue to campaign for the Weston Otmoor proposal to be rejected.

The Weston site received a relatively low rating in a Draft Sustainability Appraisal that judged the eco-credentials of each of the eco-town sites that have been proposed across the country. Cherwell District Council and Oxfordshire County Council have campaigned to have the eco-credentials of this site fully assessed since the plans were first unveiled.

Cherwell District Council lobbied the Government to assess an alternative site to Weston Otmoor for an eco community in the area. The suggested site, at North West Bicester, links to the Council's current consultation on the Local Development Framework.

Leader of the Cherwell District Council, Councillor Barry Wood, said:

'We have been clear from the moment Weston Otmoor appeared on the Government's Eco Town long list that this proposal is not acceptable. It has been dreamt up completely separately from all our thinking on how to accommodate housing growth in the District and separately from our ambitions for Bicester. Weston Otmoor threatens the future prosperity of Bicester and we cannot support it.

"We have suggested we explore the possibility of making the future growth of Bicester eco-friendly and this is the thinking behind our suggested North West Bicester option. This concept received a higher sustainability rating than the Weston Otmoor site which is a good start, but it is at an extremely early stage of development.. However we need to do a lot more work on options for expansion of Bicester and we must also consider the implications of an eco community development there for overall levels of housing growth in Cherwell. The choices involved must be properly evaluated through all our normal planning processes'.

Councillor Keith Mitchell, the Leader of Oxfordshire County Council, said: "It is good news that the eco-credentials of Weston Otmoor have been found wanting, as we always thought they would be. However it is bad news that Weston Otmoor still seems to be considered as an option in Government circles. It is to be hoped that this latest report at least means that it is considered to be far less of an option.

"We will now have to study this report in fine detail as well as considering the transport and other implications of Cherwell District Council's proposal for alternative development north west of Bicester."